

THE CHURCH GOD USES

Ephesians 4:7–16

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Our Scripture today is taken again from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4. We sort of broke off last week in the middle of the message and continued it from Ephesians 4 for this week. Ephesians 4:1–16 presents three things that are necessary to build unity in the body of Christ.

The first thing that is needed to build unity is a proper attitude.

So we looked at attitudes that make for unity in the home, unity in the church. These attitudes are humility and gentleness, patience, forbearance, and a rigorous effort to keep unity.

The second thing that is needed for unity is the right doctrine. It’s interesting that the apostle puts attitude before doctrine. It’s often the case, among born again Christians, that when there is a matter of disunity, it’s not so much over doctrine. Often it’s a matter of people contending for position. The apostle, therefore, puts the emphasis upon right attitudes, knowing that there can be not only heretical doctrine, but there can also be heretical lifestyles in the Christian community. So right doctrine is covered, second—“one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all” (Ephesians 4:4-6, NIV).

Then, in verses 7–16, we have the third step for building unity in the body. That is, the ministry which builds unity. I have described this ministry in terms of “The Church God Uses.”

I. The church God uses, first, is the church that recognizes Jesus as the source of its ministry.

“But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: ‘When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men’” (Ephesians 4:7–8, NIV).

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Paul's saying something very critical here. That is, all the ministry that is in the church—and the persons who do ministry in the church—is a result of Christ's own decision and the administration of His own gifts. He backs that up by quoting a passage in Psalm 68, "For Christ, when He comes into heaven turns around and gives gifts to men."

I want to take a moment and comment a little on this phrase "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train." For a long time in my life, I didn't know what in the world the Scriptures were talking about when the word "train" was used in reference to God. Now I know it's something related to a bridal train or to the Roman practice—when a conqueror came in from a successful war, he would march into his home city in triumph. Behind him, would be the captives of the nation he had conquered, either walking or sometimes being drawn on carriages. These captives are said to have followed in his train.

This is what Psalm 68 says about the Messiah. When the Messiah ascends to His Holy Mount, He will have captives in His train. There may be something here that's deeper than originally meets the eye. There are two possibilities in what Paul means, in quoting Psalm 68. First, the captives might simply be people like Saul of Tarsus, who Jesus—when He is in His place of triumph and power—has captured. Captured by His love. He turns around and makes these captives as gifts to the church. That could be one meaning.

Another meaning here could be that the word "captive" is a reference to those who have died in faith in God, before Jesus' sacrificial death. How do we arrive at a statement like that? In the Old Testament, the word that was used for the abode of the dead is the word *Sheol*. It is simply the teaching of the Old Testament, that all persons go to *Sheol*. The wicked go to *Sheol*, Psalm 9:17, "The wicked shall go to *Sheol* and all the nations that forget God." But the righteous also go to *Sheol*. The Psalmist says in Psalm 88:3, "My soul is full of troubles and my life draws near to

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Sheol.” The patriarchs are being described when they die as “gathered to their people.” And Jacob anticipated meeting Joseph in *Sheol*. In fact, in Genesis 37:35, he refused to be comforted in regard to Joseph and said, “No, I will go down to *Sheol* to my son mourning.”

In the centuries before Christ, many of the faithful came to believe that there were at least two divisions in *Sheol*. One was Abraham’s bosom or paradise, where the righteous dead went. The other was the abode of the wicked or Hades. Jesus appears to give approval to this understanding. In Luke 16:29–31, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, he has Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom, and the rich man in Hades, and there’s a great gulf fixed between them. Furthermore, Jesus says to the thief, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Yet later He says to Mary, “I have not yet returned the Father” (John 20:17), leading to the viewpoint that being in paradise is not the same as being with the Father. It was something else in Jesus’ thinking.

Peter insists in his apostolic preaching, in Acts 2, that God did not abandon Jesus to Hades. In fact, Christ came up from Hades, from the place of the dead. When He arose, the number of Old Testament saints, according to Matthew 27, rose as a consequence of Jesus’ death and appeared to many in the city.

Linking all of that background with Ephesians 4:8, where Paul quotes Psalm 68, perhaps what we have here—in the host of captives of Christ’s descent into *Sheol*—are the righteous regions where He led out of captivity in *Sheol* the captives and brought them to the Father’s right hand with Him. If this is the case, then it would suggest that Christ did something very dramatic as a result of His resurrection, that perhaps we have not seen. He relocated paradise and brought the captives to a new realm of relationship with Him. We know, as we continue to read the New Testament, that Paul does not look forward to going to Abraham’s bosom when he dies. Nor

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does he look forward to going to paradise as such. But he says, “To be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8) and “to depart and to be with Christ” (Philippians 1:23).

The Old Testament saints thought of going down. The New Testament saints thought of going up. Could it be that Christ, in His ascension, led with Him a host of departed dead who looked forward in faith to Him?

Whatever the case, if He did it then or He does it later, ultimately, all who die in God will be with Christ. And all of us, therefore, can be classified as being His captives. Death holds our bodies and Hades held our spirits. But Jesus holds the keys, both of death and Hades. He holds that which unlocks the imprisonment of death on our bodies and He holds that which unlocks the imprisonment of our spirit. He has the keys of death and hell.

In the position of all power and glory, Jesus turns around and gives gifts to men. Here’s another striking thing that Paul does in this verse. In Psalm 68:18, he says, “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train, receiving gifts among them.” Paul changes the verb under the inspiration of the Spirit. It is logical, when you look at the psalm, that when a person is in the place of being a conqueror, he would receive gifts from the captives. But Paul inverts the verb and says that Jesus, in the place of being the conqueror, gives gifts. He’s not on the receiving side, as much as He’s on the giving side.

Therefore, he’s saying that when Christ is in the position of all power and authority, He gives gifts.

What gifts does He give? Does He supply the church with an unlimited supply of God, under the care of the apostles, so it can grow in value and float the church financially for twenty centuries? Does He give strong investment in stock certificates and bonds so the church can run financially? Does He give the church Constitution and by-laws, so it can know how to govern itself? And

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maybe one of the reasons why there is such diversity in church government is the fact that the Lord never gave a constitution and bylaws. What is the gift that He gives?

It is the gift of people. The gift to the church perpetuates the Lord's own ministry. He gives some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, pastors and teachers. These are all facets of the Lord's own ministry. He is an apostle—the one sent. He is prophet—the one who speaks on behalf of God. He is evangelist—the one who came to seek and to serve the lost. He is the pastor, the good shepherd—"shepherd" and "pastor" are the same word. He is the Teacher—"Rabbi, we know that you have the words of God" (John 3:2).

These things are all present in Jesus. What He does in his place of ascension is simply, by giving gifts to persons, make sure that His life and ministry go on functioning when He is at the Father's right hand. In other words, Jesus, when He gives gifts, really winds up giving himself. The best gift you can ever give, anyway, is the gift of yourself. The best gift you will ever give is not something outside yourself. It is yourself.

Paul goes on to note that this Christ who has given gifts is the same person in His exaltation as He was in his humility. "(What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the whole universe)" (Ephesians 4:9–10, NIV). In other words, Christ is one and the same in His exaltation as He was when He walked the shores of Galilee. His elevation has not altered Him. Some people, when they get promoted or get wealthy or do any things we count as success, have an altered view of themselves and they don't know the people that knew them when they were nobodies or when they had nothing. But Jesus doesn't change at all when He is elevated.

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How does all this relate to the church God uses? It simply relates in the fact that God uses a church that recognizes, right at the outset, that the source of all of its ministry is Jesus. And that all the ministry functioning in the church is a gift of the risen, ascended, all-powerful Christ. This keeps us, therefore, from having too low of a view of those who are ministers to us. It keeps us from looking at whether it's a ministry of the Word or a ministry of equipping or whatever, as the Lord's own special gift of love to His people. All ministry comes from the Lord, if it's truly ministry.

II. The second thing about the church—that God uses Paul to tell us—is that the church of God has more than one coach.

“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11, NIV). When I use the word “coach,” I’m introducing sports language in the Scripture. Paul used sports illustrations, so I can get away with it. Here, in this particular passage, the church God uses has more than one coach. I think our view of the pastor is too often that the pastor is the star of the team. He’s the triple threat guy. He punts, kicks, and passes. Hopefully, in a forward direction. So everything sort of revolves around the pastor. I believe that there is an office of pastor indicated in the Scripture. I don’t believe the office of pastor is meant to be a solitary role in the church. This passage says that the Lord has appointed a team of ministries, a team of coaches in His church, of which the pastor is but one. He is joined by apostles, those who found churches; by prophets, those who bring a ministry of correction, encouragement, and consolation; by evangelists, those who have a special gift of bringing people to Christ; and pastor-teachers, who work to console, to train, to minister to, to teach. All of these together make up a ministry to the body.

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Jesus runs the church, and then together we see ourselves as a team. This is exactly what is in Ephesians 4:11. There is a team of people that are in leadership responsibilities in the church. There is, on the move today in the cults, a dangerous new thing that's occurring. Before we encountered cults that had aberrations in doctrine—the Mormons or Jehovah Witnesses. Now, though, we are facing a sort of new relational cult—of persons who come along with a strong evangelical theology. They talk about being born again. They talk about the gifts of the Spirit. They talk about ministering in Jesus' name. But they create organizations that are absolute kinds of dictatorships, where the person at the top calls all the shots. And if you are ever asked a question, you are immediately told, "God speaks through the leadership. He doesn't speak to other people. You pray and let God speak your concerns to the leadership. When the leadership gets ready to make a decision, it will." Ultimately, if that is carried to the extreme, it results in the kind of situation where the leader at the top lives a totally different lifestyle than the peons at the bottom, who go without so that the guy at the top might have.

Don't align yourself with any group naming the name of Christ if their style of operation does not include the brotherhood and the sisterhood of believers. Don't align yourself with groups that depend upon such authoritarian and rigid control of your mind, that you're not even allowed to sit down and talk, and to intelligently raise questions—not only about the faith but about the way things are done. Don't align yourselves with groups that won't talk to you about how they spend their money. Align yourself with the part of the body of Christ which truly is open and is functioning in a scriptural way. That is a safeguard, here in the passage, where the pastoral staff of an enterprise or a ministry sees itself as coaches rather than stars. And as workers who work together, where no one is lording it over someone else.

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III. The third thing about the church that God uses is that it has an every-member ministry.

Why are these apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers given? “To prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:12–16, NIV).

The job of the coaches of the church is to prepare people for the ministry. It’s not just the coaches that are doing the ministry. It’s every one of us. That ministry is not something in the church simply, although we hope you’re doing that as well. But your ministry is whatever vocation in life God has called you to. If you are a student, part of your walk right now with God is to see that as a ministry, something you offer up to God as a service. Being a mother is a ministry. Being a father is a ministry. Working in a job is a ministry. The function of pastoral staff is to equip all of us to be better ministers where God has put us.

The word for “prepare” or “equip,” as it is used in verse 12, is identical in the Greek to the word that is found in Mark 1:19, where Jesus first calls the disciples and finds them mending their nets. The word “mending” and the word “preparing” or “equipping” are the same words. It simply means to see that things work and perform their proper function.

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When there is proper coaching going on, and when every member is a minister, then the church is built up. What does that building up produce? “Unity of faith,” Paul says. Unity rather than division. It produces knowledge of the Son of God. And maturity—we are no longer children. Infants are changeable—happy one moment, sad the next. Infants have a total lack of alertness to danger. Infants are gullible. But when the church is ministering and when it’s properly coached, these things are not present. The end result is growth. And growth occurs as we speak the truth in love. Speaking the truth in love is necessary for growth. We have to be honest with one another. Paul doesn’t say, “Use brutal honesty.” There are some people who think they have the need to be brutally honest. That isn’t speaking the truth in love. We must have the freedom to communicate. Out of this great growth, we find a responsiveness to the head of the church, who is Jesus Christ. The more we respond to the head of the church, the more we realize our own full potential for individual growth and for the growth of the church.

God wants His kids to look like Him, like the heavenly Father. He wants our lives, relationally and emotionally, to look like Him. He’s pleased as we mature and as we grow up into the head, unto Jesus Christ, He’s pleased when we look like Him.

I think it pleases the Father to no end when a whole church looks like Him; when there is a group of people who really act out what they believe. They talk about love and they are loving. They talk about serving Christ and they are servants. They talk about giving and they give. They talk about wholeness and they’re seeking to be whole in Christ. I think that’s the kind of body that the Lord is really delighted in with all His heart—a church that looks like Him. If I have any passion for the church and for myself and for you as individuals, it is this passion that we would look like Jesus Christ. That we grow up into Him. God wants us to look just like Him.

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These are the things that make up the church that God uses. A ministry that has its source in Christ, a ministry that depends on more than one person as a coach. And a ministry, as well, that involves us growing up into Christ, being used by Christ, looking like Christ. Every one of us doing ministry in the name of Christ.

Closing Prayer

Father, we thank You today that we are privileged again to be the hearers of Your Word. Help us, Lord, to close the gap between where we may occasionally find ourselves and where Your Word tells us we should be. Help us to close the gap, if there is something more than an occasional thing that's going on. We sing "To be like Jesus." Lord, when we state that, it is the genuine cry of our hearts. I want to be like You. We want to be like You. We want this whole church to be like You. We want this church to radiate with Your personality, with Your light, with Your Spirit. We want this church to know Your grief and Your tears for the world and for the lost humanity. We want to know, too, Your joy and exhilaration and Your laughter and Your hope. We want to know Your meaning and Your purpose, Your love and Your blessing. Abide with us, Savior, and cause everything that You have dreamed for this body in Your heart to come to pass. Your will be done here as You have purposed it in your heart. We yield ourselves up to You, that it might be so. In the name of Jesus. Amen.